

# The Negotiated Identity of the Artist/Teacher: Research as Video Art

**Maria Robinson-Cseke**

*Doctoral Student  
Faculty of Education  
University of Alberta*

My autobiographical poem [inspired by George Ella Lyon (1999)], marked the beginning of an arts-based inquiry into a question of identity that took further shape through a video-artwork, *The Evolution of an Art Teacher: Where I'm From*. Arts-based research is a methodology that uses a myriad of forms and combinations of creative arts experiences for ways of understanding through the discovery of new knowledge and meaning (Speiser, 2004). Beginning at the level of the body, the video progresses through images of learning, teaching, art, and art making; images of performance and identity space. The context becomes an imperative component to the usefulness of poetry and video in this research. The words are juxtaposed with images that open up questions, which together perform the often-difficult balance, of identity as an artist and as an educator. Framed by the an understanding of human experience that Lacan described as the three registers of the *Real*, the *Imaginary*, and the *Symbolic*, this research as art, is an effort to unpack the continual formation, recognition and changing identity of an art educator,

*Identity* is the relation established by psychological identification. Psychoanalytic theory is one way into understanding identity. Jacques Lacan proposed that a human psyche processes information from the body and the world through three different domains, that he called *registers*. These three different registers of self derive from three different forms of experience and memory (Bracher, 1999,). The registers, which co-exist in one psyche and ideally work in balance with one another, are: the *Real*, the *Imaginary*, and the *Symbolic*. The *Real*, resonating with some aspects of Freud's *id*, is the realm of bodily affect and visceral experience. We cannot access the *Real* on a conscious level, but it is there, that gut feeling, under the surface, and is the foundation for the *Imaginary*. The *Imaginary* is a function of visual memory and *Symbolic* codes. It is the image that we have of ourselves, the realm of identity formation, and draws on the *Symbolic* for its material. The *Symbolic* manifests itself in verbal thought, in terms of societal meanings, values, and ideals. The *Symbolic Order* is much like the proverbial angel, sitting on our shoulder, telling us what we should do.

It is the cultural codes and the voices of society telling us who and how we should be. In their essence, all three registers are an expression of the individual's investment in making meaning of experience.

## Identity Forming

Like most young children, I enjoyed mark making at an early age. Whether it was art or not is beside the point. I found joy in the active, visceral experience. To a certain extent, it was a *Real* experience. I was encouraged by my father to be artistic. I remember he decorated my bedroom with pastel drawings of animals beginning with each letter of the alphabet. It was, literally, the *voice of the father* that validated art for me in my formative years. Identity-bearing adjectives like "unique", "independent", "creative", and "intuitive", were Master signifiers provided to me through the *Symbolic order*. Later, my *Imaginary* identity found validation in these signified social codes through bodily appearance or physical performance (Bracher, 2006), like dressing in an "artsy" fashion and being able to draw well.

However, there were ideals, manifested through school culture, which conflicted with my forming artistic identity. There were prevailing attitudes that art was not a serious, worthwhile subject. Art was relegated to Friday afternoons, if there was time. My teachers often knew about, and had interest-in art lessons. I eventually took art classes from the “hippy in high school” who was reputed to be “a little off her rocker” by much of the more traditional school community. I intentionally took advanced academic courses for fear that I would appear a “flake”. My own internalized perception, in my teen years, was that artists were intuitive, but not intellectual.

I struggled with those signifiers. I struggled with my desire to make art and the conflicting societal negativity toward artists as being “hippies”, “self-serving”, and “flaky”. The symbolic ideals of the artist (creativity and independence) often conflict with the symbolic ideals of the teacher (neutral and conformist). In (Figure 1) *The Evolution of an Art Teacher* (Robinson-Cseke, 2006), I presented the image of eyes looking through glasses to represent the thinking artist.



**Figure 1**

Video Detail

I juxtaposed this later with the teacher's "all knowing" look over glasses (Figure 3). In favoring one set of signifiers, the other set is being suppressed, so internal conflict is felt.

### Identity/Desire Recognized

It is in revealing what is avoided, excluded, and unknown, that light is shed on art-teacher identity. Our *desires* are often unknown to us. The desire for recognition and validation is revealed in our authoritarian behavior as teachers. Taubman (1992, p. 222) refers to the classroom as a "hall of mirrors", as our images are reflected back on our *Imaginary* registers by our students. I used an image of my hand being reflected by a mirror to illustrate this point (Figure 2). The fragmented mirror evokes the conflict felt by the artist-teacher's body ego, at the level of the *Real*.



**Figure 2**  
Video Detail



**Figure 3**

Video Detail

Another desire, often as artists, and sometimes as teachers, is for resistance and protest. Resistance indicates a negotiation of identity within the three registers. Resistance maintains a form of balance that keeps the *Real*, *Imaginary* and *Symbolic* intact. According to Lacan, if any of the registers were to overpower the others, this would result in psychosis. It is in the conflict that our identity is negotiated.

### **Identity Changing**

It is in understanding how we see ourselves that we are in a position to make changes. In my video (Figure 3), I incorporated the image of myself, an artist-teacher, looking over my glasses at the viewer, with the words, "return the gaze" superimposed. I present myself as an artist-teacher being looked at by the viewer. My intention is that you, the





Figure 4

viewer, hold the Lacanian gaze of the *Symbolic*. Perhaps you have begun to recognize the social ideals that are cast upon me, and perhaps have begun to make judgments about me. My image *returns the gaze*, making your *Imaginary* aware of your *Symbolic*'s prejudices and socially held ideals. You, the viewer, become conscious of your self and aware of your position as judge. It is in this return of the gaze that I attempt to make you aware of your own negotiated identity; aware that identity is forever changing. Identity isn't seen as fixed, but is open, shifting, and ambiguous.

The video pans up my forearm, tracking veins that veer in different paths. A choice is presented to make change. An image of a painting overlaps the arm. The painting and sound reveals a hand breaking free from the confines of a test tube (Figure 4). The *Real* interrupts the *Imaginary* as a sudden break from the expected, a chance to become aware of accepted signifiers, a chance to redirect.

## Conclusion

This paper has been culled from research practice that has been represented as art work. (Auto)biography is used for making personal meaning and understanding identity. The last frame of my video stresses the link between our life-stories and our identity by quoting Robert Fulford, "To discover we have no story is to acknowledge that our existence is meaningless, which we may find unbearable" (1999). This discovery would be a fracture in the *Imaginary*, created by the *Real*. Re-sealing this fracture preserves identity. In the process, the identity shifts and changes. Lacan's concept of the *gaze* opens a way to encourage the viewer to become more self-aware. Lacanian theory, ethnography, and art presented as inquiry by the researcher, contribute to directing you, whether an artist, art-educator, or art-education student, to new ways of thinking, and to open up space for extraction, negotiation, and discussion.

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